

BOOK REVIEW

Ralph Darlington. *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910–14*

London: Pluto Press, 2023. Pp. 336. £19.99 (paper).

Marcus Morris 

Manchester Metropolitan University
Email: marcus.morris@mmu.ac.uk

From 1910 to the outbreak of war in 1914, Britain saw unprecedented levels of industrial and labor unrest, with millions of days lost to strike action and rapid growth in union membership, which resulted in conflict (often physical) between workers and the authorities. For Ralph Darlington, though, this was more than just unrest, it was a period of revolt underpinned by a zeitgeist of defiance. It “was one of the most sustained, dramatic and violent explosions of industrial militancy and social conflict the country has ever experienced,” representing the “explosion of self-confidence, organisation and militancy by [the] working class” (1). This period of revolt, for Darlington, was also distinct from previous periods of unrest, characterized by “the willingness of significant sections of workers to take sympathetic action for others in dispute, both within and between different industries” (4).

In marking this period out as distinct from previous periods of industrial dispute, Darlington provides a comprehensive overview of the direct action and social unrest that punctuated these years. He also charts the often hardline response of employers and local and national authorities, suggesting that they were alarmed at the threat posed by these developments, seeing it as a wider challenge to the political system. The detail provided here is exceptional, setting *Labour Revolt* apart from other literature on the period. Darlington’s approach also stands apart from recent studies in his desire to provide a “distinct revolutionary Marxist assessment” of the events (9). This is seen in the language—sometimes problematically—used, the themes covered, and the conclusions drawn. This is thus a study explicitly on the side of the workers, though it is not lacking in academic rigor because of that. Darlington also aims to take a distinctly bottom-up approach. Though an admirable aim, it must be noted that there remains a tendency to rely on top-down or official evidence, with the voice of the workers missing. This is understandable but needs acknowledging.

Darlington begins with an outline of the key causes and context. These were multiple and it was this combination that in part resulted in this being a period of revolt rather than merely unrest. Darlington suggests that central causes were shrinking markets and employers’ attempts to reduce labor costs, the limiting of union rights and the lack of union recognition in certain industries, growing resentment of workers’ social conditions and the uneven distribution of wealth, a growing disjoint between union leadership and the rank-and-file membership coupled with the dynamism of the latter, dissatisfaction with conventional politics, and the growing influence of the radical left.

Following this, Darlington provides “a brief chronological narrative of some of the most important and/or characteristic individual strike movements between 1910 and 1914, concentrating attention on their origins, nature of development and overall impact” (53). This is not as brief as the author suggests, with multiple chapters devoted to this very detailed narrative. The range of strike action and other incidences of industrial and social

unrest covered, with a broad occupational and geographical range considered, sets this study apart from the vast majority of literature centered on labor unrest in this period. However, these sections remain predominately narrative rather than analytical, and in several cases, we are given only snapshots of strikes and strike action. The intention here, though, is clear and does point to the sheer scale of unrest that for Darlington is central to this period being characterized as a labor revolt. This narrative finishes with a series of defeats for striking workers in 1913 and 1914, which some have argued (along with the outbreak of war) brought about the end of this period of labor unrest. This, Darlington suggests, was not the case. For him, it did not arrest militant momentum, with the government expecting further strike action due to the growing number of solidarity strikes and the formation of the Triple Alliance which united the miners', transport, and railway workers' unions. War breaking out did bring a dramatic end to strike action, but as Darlington points out later in the study, it did not end "all pre-war conflicts of interest between workers and employers" (274). Darlington's argument is persuasive here and it is certainly possible to see the renewed and indeed increased industrial unrest in 1919 as an extension of that which occurred between 1911 and 1914.

The final substantive section of *Labour Revolt* assesses what Darlington sees as the most distinctive features of this period of revolt. He argues that the labor revolt was characterized by a younger, rank-and-file workers' militancy, which was a bottom-up militancy, independent of and in opposition to union leadership and so-called officialdom. He also examines strike organization, highlighting class and community solidarity, which he suggests was a significant stimulus to the growth of the movement. He looks at the influence of the radical left, through the voices of its leadership, and argues that there was a broader radicalization of the workers that underpinned the revolt. In this, Darlington is stressing the class consciousness of the labor revolt through direct action from below. Interestingly, he extends this to employers' and the government's response, which he describes as class struggle from above with the violence that accompanied the revolt the result of their actions.

Labour Revolt is a comprehensive study of the period, adding much to our overall understanding of the unrest, which has only seen limited focus in the current literature. Darlington highlights its distinctiveness, its scale, and its impact, offering a persuasive argument for why we should consider this a period of revolt rather than unrest. There are some issues as highlighted above, but these do not detract from the overall quality. For those studying labor politics, industrial relations, and official responses in the years before the First World War, this is an invaluable study.